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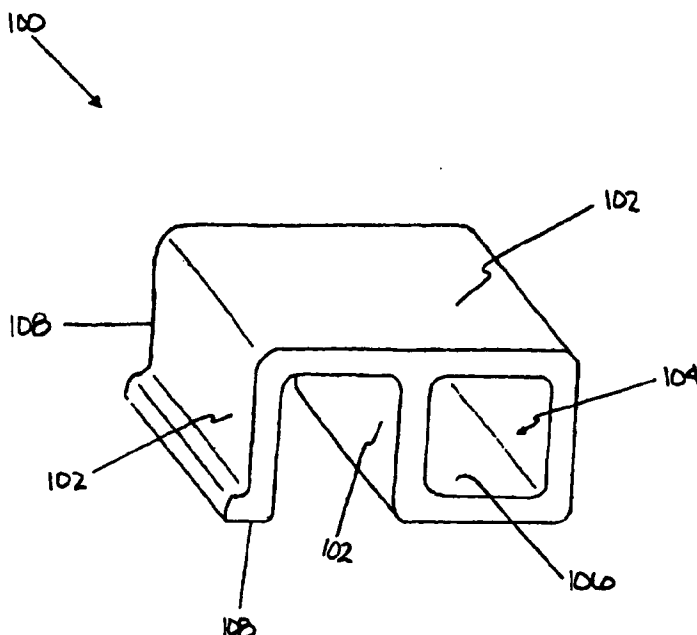
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(54) Title: COOLING OF EXTRUDED AND COMPRESSION MOLDED MATERIALS



(57) Abstract: The present invention relates to a system and a method for cooling extruded and molded materials. The present invention is especially useful to thoroughly cool an extrudate by releasing a cooling fluid in a hollow portion of the extrudate. Hollows may be created in order to reduce material, weight, and/or processing time. A fluid below about 80 degrees Fahrenheit is released into the hollow so as to cool the material and to assist in solidification. Increases in production line throughput may result by rapidly cooling the molded material. Other uses for the present invention include injection molding, compression molding, gas assist molding, and co-extrusion.

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COOLING OF EXTRUDED AND COMPRESSION MOLDED MATERIALS

This is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Application No. 09/766,054, filed January 19, 2001, which is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to a system and method for cooling manufactured articles and, more particularly, to a system and method for cooling extruded and molded materials with a fluid that is below about 80 degrees Fahrenheit. The present invention may also be used in other types of manufacturing techniques in which the output or material must be cooled from a heated state. The present invention includes a system and method for cooling synthetic wood composite materials including, but not limited to, cellulosic-filled plastic composites. In addition, the present invention may also be used to cool other types of pure or mixed materials including, but not limited to, plastics, polymers, foamed plastics, plastic compositions, inorganic-filled plastic compositions, metals, metallic compositions, alloys, mixtures including any of the aforementioned materials, and other similar, conventional, or suitable materials that need to be cooled after being processed. For instance, the present invention may be used to cool polyvinyl chloride (PVC) products and products made from other plastics.

For several reasons, there is a need to find materials that exhibit the look and feel of natural wood. The supply of wood in the world's forests for construction and other purposes is dwindling. Consequently, the supply of wood from mature trees has become a concern in recent years, and the cost of wood has risen. As a result, several attempts have been made by others to find a suitable wood-like material.

Cellulosic/polymer composites have been developed as replacements for all-natural wood, particle board, wafer board, and other similar materials. For example, U.S. Patent Nos. 3,908,902, 4,091,153, 4,686,251, 4,708,623, 5,002,713, 5,055,247, 5,087,400, 5,151,238, 6,011,091, and 6,103,791 relate to processes and/or compositions for making wood replacement products. As compared to natural woods, cellulosic/polymer composites offer superior resistance to wear and tear. In addition, cellulosic/polymer composites have enhanced resistance to moisture, and it is well known that the retention of moisture is a primary cause of the warping, splintering, and discoloration of natural woods. Moreover, cellulosic/polymer composites may be sawed, sanded, shaped, turned, fastened, and finished in the same manner as natural woods. Therefore, cellulosic/polymer composites are commonly used for applications such as interior and exterior decorative house moldings, picture frames, furniture, porch decks, deck railings, window moldings, window components, door components, roofing structures, building siding, and other suitable indoor and outdoor items. However, many attempts to make products from cellulosic/polymer composite materials have failed due to poor or improper manufacturing techniques.

In the present invention, a product or article is manufactured by a desired technique such as, but not limited to, extrusion, compression molding, injection molding, or other similar, suitable, or conventional manufacturing techniques. The product is then cooled by subjecting it to a fluid that is below about 80 degrees Fahrenheit. The present invention can be used alone or in conjunction with other known or later developed cooling methods. Accordingly, the present invention can more thoroughly and efficiently cool the manufactured product or article to a desired

level. This can lead to faster production times as well as a product having improved structural, physical, and aesthetic characteristics.

In addition to the novel features and advantages mentioned above, other objects and advantages of the present invention will be readily apparent from the following descriptions of the drawings and exemplary embodiments.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a cross sectional view of an extrudate.

Figure 2 is a view of an extrusion die showing an exemplary location of a cryogenic nozzle.

Figure 3 is an elevation view of one embodiment of a system implementing the present invention.

Figure 4 is a partial cross sectional view along the line A-A of Figure 3.

Figure 5 is a partial elevation view of another embodiment of a system of the present invention.

Figure 6 shows a sectioned schematic of an extruder line used in accordance with the practice of one embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 7 is a cross sectional view from a lateral side angle of an exemplary die system of the present invention.

Figure 8 is a cross sectional view from a top side angle of the die system of Figure 7.

Figure 9 is a cross sectional view from an exit side angle of the die system of Figure 7.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EXEMPLARY EMBODIMENT(S)

The present invention is directed to a system and method for cooling manufactured articles or products. It is not intended to limit the present invention to particular manufacturing techniques or particular materials. The present invention may be used to cool articles or products made by variety of different manufacturing techniques. Examples of manufacturing techniques that may utilize the present invention include, but are not limited to, extrusion (including co-extrusion), compression molding, injection molding, and other known, similar, or conventional techniques for manufacturing products or articles from plastic, wood, metal, mixtures of these materials, or other materials used to make products.

The present invention is particularly useful for cooling plastics, polymers, and cellulosic/polymer composite materials that have been extruded or molded. The materials that may be used to make cellulosic/polymer composites include, but are not limited to, cellulosic fillers, polymers, plastics, thermoplastics, inorganic fillers, cross-linking agents, lubricants, process aids, stabilizers, accelerators, inhibitors, enhancers, compatibilizers, blowing agents, foaming agents, thermosetting materials, and other similar, suitable, or conventional materials. Examples of cellulosic fillers include sawdust, newspapers, alfalfa, wheat pulp, wood chips, wood fibers, wood particles, ground wood, wood flour, wood flakes, wood veneers, wood laminates, paper, cardboard, straw, cotton, rice hulls, coconut shells, peanut shells, bagass, plant fibers, bamboo fiber, palm fiber, kenaf, flax, and other similar materials. In addition to PVC, examples of polymers include multilayer films, high density polyethylene (HDPE), polypropylene (PP), low density polyethylene (LDPE), chlorinated polyvinyl chloride (CPVC), acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS), ethyl-

vinyl acetate, other similar copolymers, other similar, suitable, or conventional thermoplastic materials, and formulations that incorporate any of the aforementioned polymers. Examples of inorganic fillers include talc, calcium carbonate, kaolin clay, magnesium oxide, titanium dioxide, silica, mica, barium sulfate, acrylics, and other similar, suitable, or conventional materials. Examples of thermosetting materials include polyurethanes, such as isocyanates, phenolic resins, unsaturated polyesters, epoxy resins, and other similar, suitable, or conventional materials. Combinations of the aforementioned materials are also examples of thermosetting materials. Examples of lubricants include zinc stearate, calcium stearate, esters, amide wax, paraffin wax, ethylene bis-stearamide, and other similar, suitable, or conventional materials. Examples of stabilizers include tin stabilizers, lead and metal soaps such as barium, cadmium, and zinc, and other similar, suitable, or conventional materials. In addition, examples of process aids include acrylic modifiers and other similar, suitable, or conventional materials.

Figure 1 shows one example of an extrudate 100 that may be cooled by the present invention. The extrudate 100 includes an exterior surface 102, a hollow 104, an interior surface 106, and two ends 108. The exterior surface 102 may be cooled by a traditional method such as using a warm water bath or water mist. However, the interior surface 106 may not be sufficiently cooled by many traditional methods because the surface may not be available for contact with the cooling medium. The interior surface 106 defines the boundary of the hollow 104. The interior surface 106 may be accessed from either end 108. The interior surface 106 may not be cooled to a desired level within a desired amount of time by externally applied coolants.

Figure 2 shows one example of an extrusion die 200 adapted with the present invention. The extrusion die 200 defines the cross section of the extrudate by the shape of the profile form/flow channel 206. Hollows in the cross section of the extrudate are each formed with a standing core 202. The standing core 202 is fitted with a nozzle 204. The nozzle 204 is adapted to connect with a source of the cooling fluid (not shown). The nozzle 204 is oriented to spray into the hollow formed in the extrudate cross section by the standing core 202.

Figure 3 shows one example of a system 300 that may utilize the present invention. The system 300 includes an extruder 302 and an extruder 304. In this example, a crosshead die system 306 puts a cap layer from the extruder 304 on the material extruded by the extruder 302. A container 308 may be used to hold a cooling fluid of the present invention. The fluid is used to cool the extruded product or article 312 after it exits the die system 306. In this embodiment, a valve is used to control the release of gas, e.g., vapor, from the fluid. A hose, conduit, tube, or any other suitable transfer device 310 may be used to direct the gas from the container 308 to the desired location for cooling the extruded product 312. The transfer device 310 may be formed by one integral component or a plurality of interconnected components. For instance, a portion of the transfer device 310 may be a passage through the die system 306. In this example, the transfer device 310 extends through the die system 306 so that the gas is released in the hollow of the extruded product 312 after it exits the die system 306. In this manner, the present invention can provide efficient and thorough cooling of the extruded product 312. Moreover, the extruded product 312 may be further introduced into a liquid bath 314, a spray mist chamber 316, and/or any other desired cooling system to achieve additional

cooling of the extruded product 312 if desired. Examples of the liquid bath 314 and the spray mist chamber 316 are provided in U.S. Patent No. 5,827,462.

Depending on the type of cooling fluid and the desired expulsion rate of the cooling fluid, the container 308 may be pressurized. The container 308 may be connected to a compressor, e.g., an air compressor or any other similar, suitable, or conventional compressing device, in order to maintain the desired pressure in the container 308. Additionally, the container 308 may be in fluid communication with a blower or a pump to obtain the desired expulsion rate of the cooling fluid from the container 308. A blower in fluid communication with the container 308 may also be utilized to accelerate the cooling fluid to a desired velocity after it has been expelled.

Figure 4 is a cross section view along the line A-A of Figure 3. The extruded product 312 includes a cap layer 404. The transfer device 310 may extend through the die system 306 to a nozzle 406 that releases gas from the cooling fluid into a hollow of the extruded product 312. In this instance, gas vapor 402 permeates through the hollow of the extruded product 312, thereby providing much improved cooling of the extruded product 312. In fact, the inventors have surprisingly discovered that using the present invention to inject the cooling fluid into a hollow portion of a product may be sufficient to thoroughly cool the entire product, i.e., the inside and the outside of the product. As a result, the present invention may eliminate the need to provide another cooling system to cool the outer surface of the product.

It should be recognized that Figures 3 and 4 are merely one example of a manufacturing system that may utilize the present invention. As noted above, the present invention may be used in any manufacturing system in which the processed

material needs to be cooled to a desired level. For example, the present invention may be used in an extrusion system consisting of a single extruder that is in-line with a die system. Also, the present invention may be used to cool any type of material including, but not limited to, injection molded materials and compression molded materials.

It should also be recognized that the cooling fluid of the present invention may be expelled elsewhere relative to the manufactured product (i.e., other than in a hollow portion of the product). For example, Figure 5 shows an embodiment in which the gas vapor 500 is dispersed by the transfer device 502 onto the exterior of the product 504. The present invention also includes dispersing multiple streams of the cooling fluid onto the same or different portions of the manufactured product. For instance, flows of the cooling fluid may be simultaneously dispersed onto the exterior and interior surfaces of the manufactured product.

Turning to Figure 6, this Figure shows a sectioned schematic of an extruder line 600 used in accordance with the practice of one embodiment of the present invention. Figure 6 shows an extruder line 600 which includes co-extrusion apparatus 602. Co-extrusion apparatus 602 includes insulated transport tube 604 that is adapted to carry cooling fluid 606. The cooling fluid 606 may be gas that may be delivered from a supply of cryogenic fluid. Co-extrusion apparatus 602 also includes a cross head extruder 608 which is adapted to prepare the thermoplastic material 610 for extrusion through a die which forms a hollow, rectangular profile and urges it along longitudinal direction 612. Further layers of thermoplastic material such as layer 614 may be added through the use of additional extruders such as extruder 616. Such additional layers of thermoplastic material may include layers of

material with specific characteristics for exterior use, such as fluoropolymers and PVC having greater or lesser durability and resistance to changes in aesthetic appearance resulting from exposure to weather and environmental/atmospheric conditions, as dictated by the desired end user. The thermoplastic material 610 is formed by the forming die 618 into the desired final shape, such as a rectangular cross-section. The cooling fluid 606 permeates through the hollow space created in thermoplastic material 610. The cooling fluid 606 may be at a significantly lower temperature than the surrounding thermoplastic material 610. The cooling fluid 606 cools the thermoplastic material 610, assisting the thermoplastic material to "skin" or solidify.

Figures 7 through 9 show a cross sectional view of one example of a die system 700 that is configured to be in-line with an extruder. The extruded material flows through the die system in the direction indicated by arrow 702. In this example, the resultant extrudate 704 defines three hollow portions that are separated by webs 706 and 708. The cooling fluid enters the die system 700 through passages 710. In some embodiments, it should be recognized that a tube, conduit, or any other type of transfer device may extend through the passages 710 for directing the flow of the cooling fluid through the passages 710. The cooling fluid exits the die system 700 through passages 710 in the direction indicated by arrows 712. In such an embodiment, the passages 710 intersect the path of flow of the extruded material through the die system 700. In other words, the passages 710 intersect the flow channel in the die system 700.

The die system 700 may be heated to a sufficient level to facilitate extrusion and limit premature curing of the extrudate in the die system 700. In this example of

an in-line system, the passages 710 actually extend through the die system 700, intersecting the path of flow of the extruded material through the die system 700. In such embodiments, it may be preferable to limit cooling of the die system 700 by the cooling fluid in the passages 710. Accordingly, the passages 710 may be insulated by a suitable material. For example, the passages 710 may be lined with ceramic insulation, putty ceramics, or any other similar, suitable, or conventional insulating material in order to limit undesired heat loss by the die system 700. In fact, it should be recognized that the transfer device for the cooling fluid in any type of embodiment may be insulated in order to limit undesired cooling of surrounding items.

As best seen in the example of Figure 9, the passages 710 may be substantially surrounded by die material 714 even where the passages 710 intersect the path of flow of the extruded material. In this manner, direct contact between the extruded material and the passages 710 may be avoided, if desired. The die material 714 surrounding the passages 710 may be heated to facilitate the extrusion process. Also, air gaps may be provided between the die material 714 and the passages 710 for additional insulation.

Any desired cooling fluid may be used in the present invention. The cooling fluid, e.g., gas or liquid, may have a temperature below about 80 degrees Fahrenheit, more preferably below about 68 degrees Fahrenheit, still more preferably below about 32 degrees Fahrenheit, even more preferably below about minus 100 degrees Fahrenheit. On the other hand, the temperature may be above about minus 325 degrees Fahrenheit, more preferably above about minus 300 degrees Fahrenheit, still more preferably above about minus 275 degrees Fahrenheit, even more preferably above about minus 250 degrees Fahrenheit.

However, in some embodiments of the present invention, the cooling fluid may be above about 80 degrees Fahrenheit or below about minus 325 degrees Fahrenheit. Examples of the cooling fluid are air and water. Another example of the cooling fluid is gas or vapor that is produced from a cryogenic fluid. For instance, a cryogenic fluid may have a temperature below about minus 250 degrees Fahrenheit. Examples of cryogenic fluids include, but are not limited to, liquid oxygen, liquid nitrogen, liquid neon, liquid hydrogen, liquid helium, and other similar, suitable, or conventional cryogenic fluids.

In addition to the temperature, the velocity of the cooling fluid may also impact its effectiveness. By selecting a suitable velocity and temperature of the cooling fluid, the inventors have discovered that an entire product can be thoroughly cooled just by injecting the cooling fluid into a hollow portion of the product. The velocity of the cooling fluid may be greater than about 10 miles per hour, more preferably greater than about 40 miles per hour, and it may be less than about 100 miles per hour, more preferably less than about 50 miles per hour. However, it should be recognized that the velocity of the cooling fluid may be less than about 10 miles per hour or greater than about 100 miles per hour in some embodiments.

The exemplary embodiments herein disclosed are not intended to be exhaustive or to unnecessarily limit the scope of the invention. The exemplary embodiments were chosen and described in order to explain the principles of the present invention so that others skilled in the art may practice the invention. Having shown and described exemplary embodiments of the present invention, those skilled in the art will realize that many variations and modifications may be made to affect the described invention. Many of those variations and modifications will provide the

same result and fall within the spirit of the claimed invention. It is the intention, therefore, to limit the invention only as indicated by the scope of the claims.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for cooling a product, said method comprising:
providing a die, said die having a passage;
extruding a material through said die to form said product, said product having a hollow;
directing a cooling fluid through said passage; and
releasing said cooling fluid in said hollow of said product as said product exits said die.
2. The method of claim 1 wherein said passage is lined with an insulating material.
3. The method of claim 2 wherein said insulating material is selected from the group consisting of ceramic insulation and putty ceramics.
4. The method of claim 1 wherein said material is a cellulosic/polymer composition.
5. The method of claim 1 wherein said cooling fluid has a temperature between about 80 degrees Fahrenheit and about minus 325 degrees Fahrenheit.
6. The method of claim 5 wherein said cooling fluid has a temperature between about 68 degrees Fahrenheit and about minus 300 degrees Fahrenheit.
7. The method of claim 6 wherein said cooling fluid has a temperature between about 32 degrees Fahrenheit and about minus 275 degrees Fahrenheit.
8. The method of claim 7 wherein said cooling fluid has a temperature between about minus 100 degrees Fahrenheit and about minus 250 degrees Fahrenheit.
9. The method of claim 1 wherein said cooling fluid is selected from liquid oxygen, liquid nitrogen, liquid neon, liquid hydrogen, and liquid helium.

10. The method of claim 1 wherein said cooling fluid is selected from the group selected from liquids, gases, and vapors.

11. The method of claim 1 wherein said die is in-line with an extruder.

12. The method of claim 11 wherein said passage intersects a path of flow of said material through said die.

13. A die adapted to be used with an extruder to form a product having a hollow portion, said die comprising:

a flow channel adapted to be in fluid communication with said extruder such that an extruded material is forced through said flow channel to form said product; and

a passage extending through said die, said passage adapted to be in fluid communication with a source of a cooling fluid;

wherein said passage is adapted to release said cooling fluid in said hollow of said product as said product exits said flow channel.

14. The die of claim 13 wherein said passage is lined with an insulating material.

15. The die of claim 14 wherein said insulating material is selected from the group consisting of ceramic insulation and putty ceramics.

16. The die of claim 13 wherein said die is adapted to be in-line with said extruder.

17. A die adapted to be used with an extruder to form a product having a hollow portion, said die comprising:

a flow channel adapted to be in fluid communication with said extruder such that an extruded material is forced through said flow channel to form said product; and

a passage extending through said die and intersecting said flow channel, said passage adapted to be in fluid communication with a source of a cooling fluid;

wherein said passage is adapted to release said cooling fluid in said hollow of said product as said product exits said flow channel.

18. The die of claim 17 wherein said passage is lined with an insulating material.
19. The die of claim 18 wherein said insulating material is selected from the group consisting of ceramic insulation and putty ceramics.
20. A method for cooling a product made from a cellulosic/polymer composition, said method comprising:
 - manufacturing said product from said cellulosic/polymer composition; and
 - subjecting said product to gas produced from a cryogenic fluid.
21. The method of claim 20 wherein said cryogenic fluid has a temperature below about -250 degrees Fahrenheit.
22. The method of claim 21 wherein said cryogenic fluid is selected from liquid oxygen, liquid nitrogen, liquid neon, liquid hydrogen, and liquid helium.
23. The method of claim 20 wherein said gas is vapor.
24. The method of claim 20 wherein:
 - said product has an interior surface; and
 - said interior surface is subjected to said gas.
25. The method of claim 24 wherein said interior surface defines a hollow.
26. The method of claim 20 wherein an exterior surface of said product is subjected to said gas.

27. The method of claim 20 wherein said product is manufactured using a method selected from the group consisting of extrusion, injection molding, and compression molding.
28. The method of claim 20 wherein:
said cellulosic/polymer composition is extruded through at least one die; and
said product is subjected to said gas as said product exits said at least one die.
29. The method of claim 20 further comprising subjecting said product to a liquid bath.
30. The method of claim 29 wherein said liquid bath is comprised of water.
31. A method of cooling a product, said method comprising:
manufacturing said product having a hollow portion; and
subjecting said hollow portion to gas produced from a cryogenic fluid.
32. The method of claim 31 wherein said cryogenic fluid has a temperature below about -250 degrees Fahrenheit.
33. The method of claim 32 wherein said cryogenic fluid is selected from liquid oxygen, liquid nitrogen, liquid neon, liquid hydrogen, and liquid helium.
34. The method of claim 31 wherein said gas is vapor.
35. The method of claim 31 further comprising subjecting an exterior surface of said product to said gas.
36. The method of claim 31 wherein said product is manufactured using a method selected from the group consisting of extrusion, injection molding, and compression molding.

37. The method of claim 31 wherein:
said product is manufactured by extrusion through at least one die; and
said hollow portion is subjected to said gas as said product exits said at least one die.
38. The method of claim 31 further comprising subjecting said product to a liquid bath.
39. The method of claim 31 wherein said product is made from a material selected from the group consisting of cellulosic/polymer composites, plastics, polymers, thermoplastics, foamed plastics, plastic compositions, inorganic-filled plastic compositions, metals, metallic compositions, alloys, and mixtures including any of the aforementioned materials.

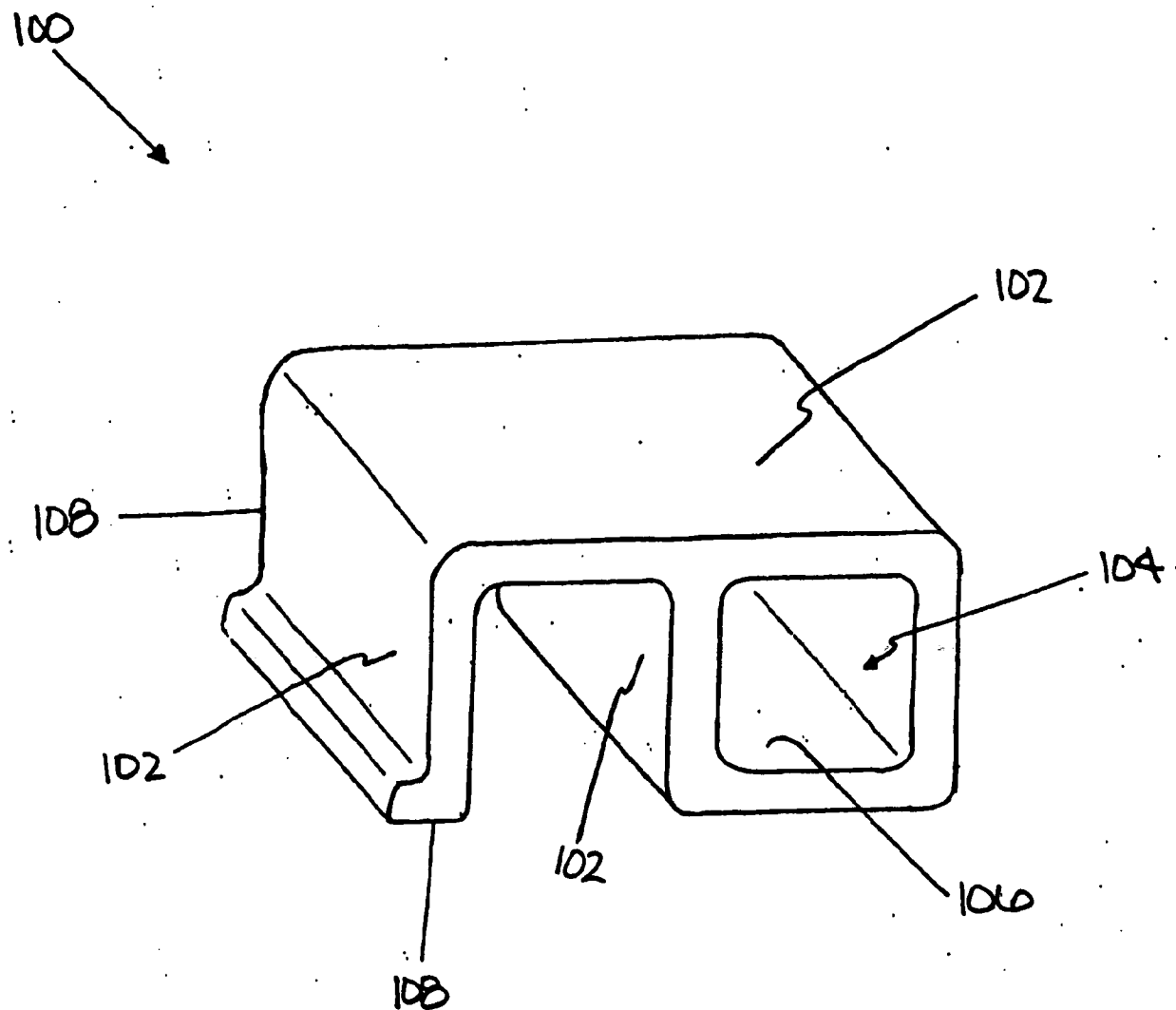


FIG. 1.

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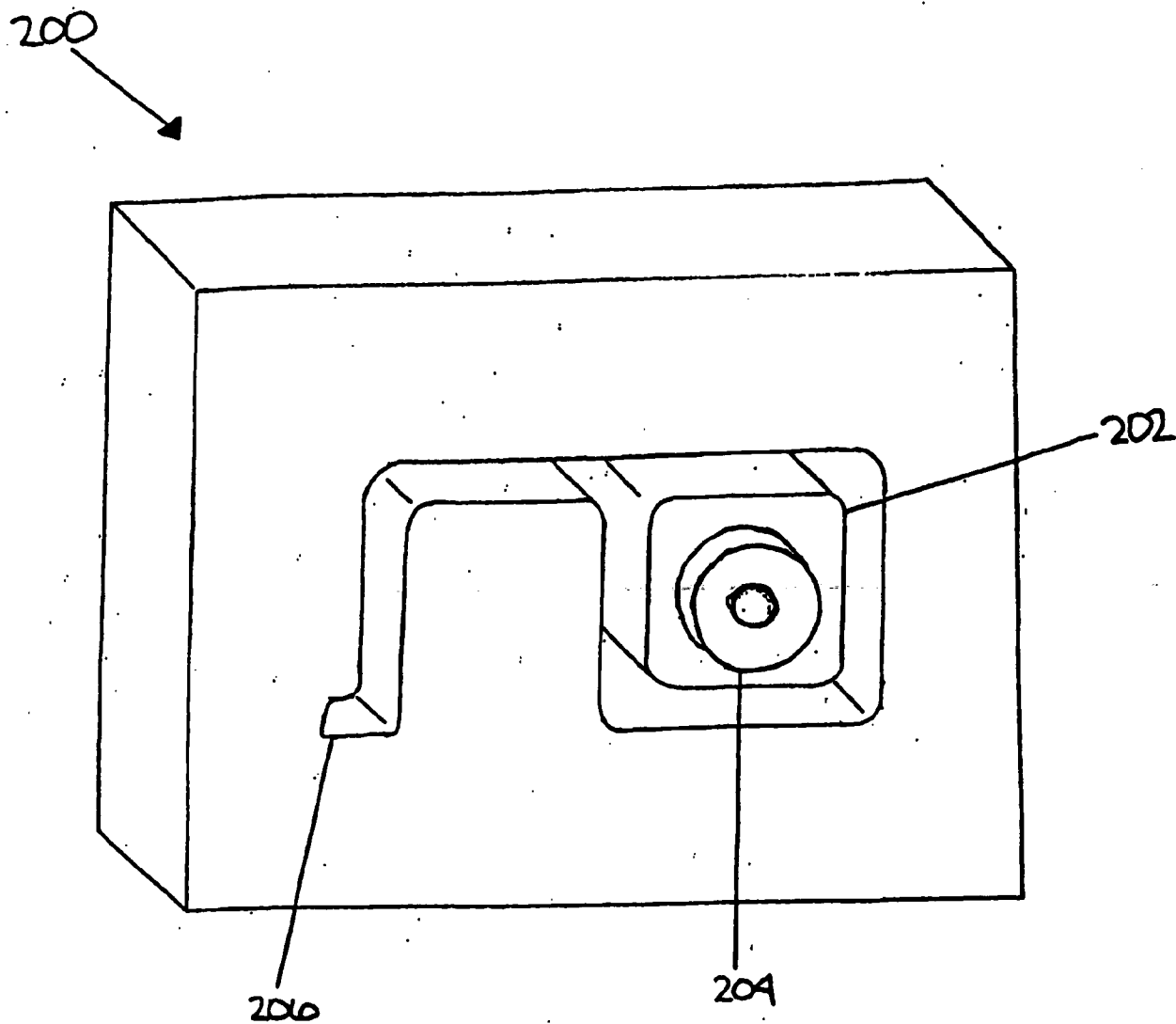


FIG. 2

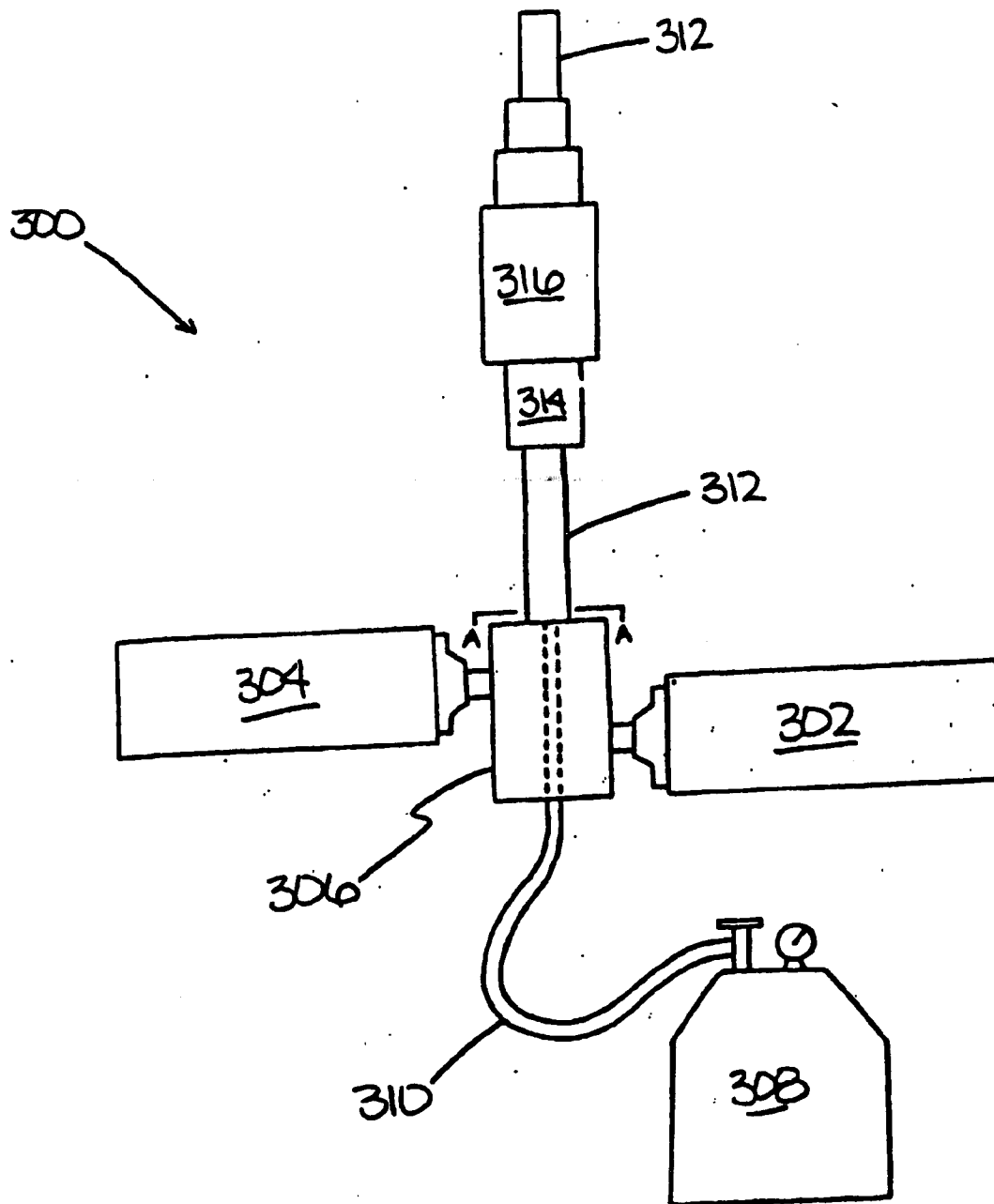


FIG. 3

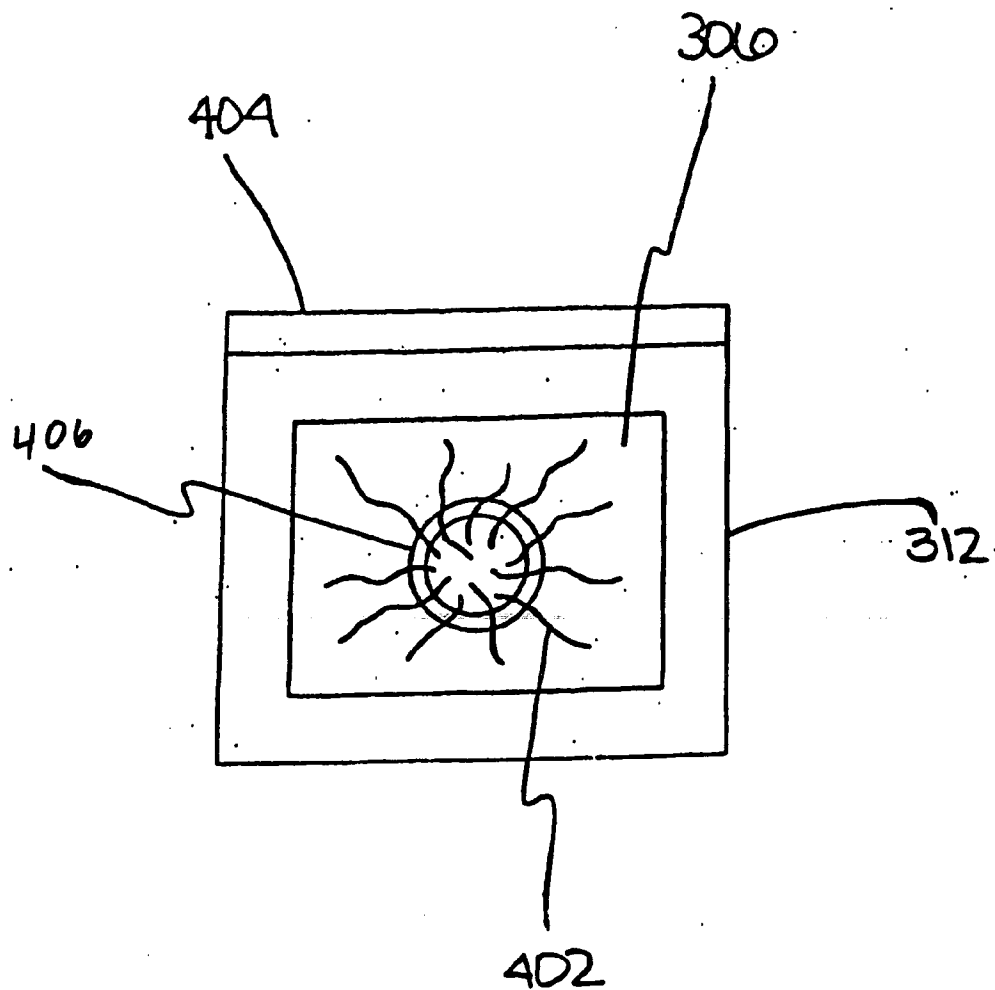


FIG. 4

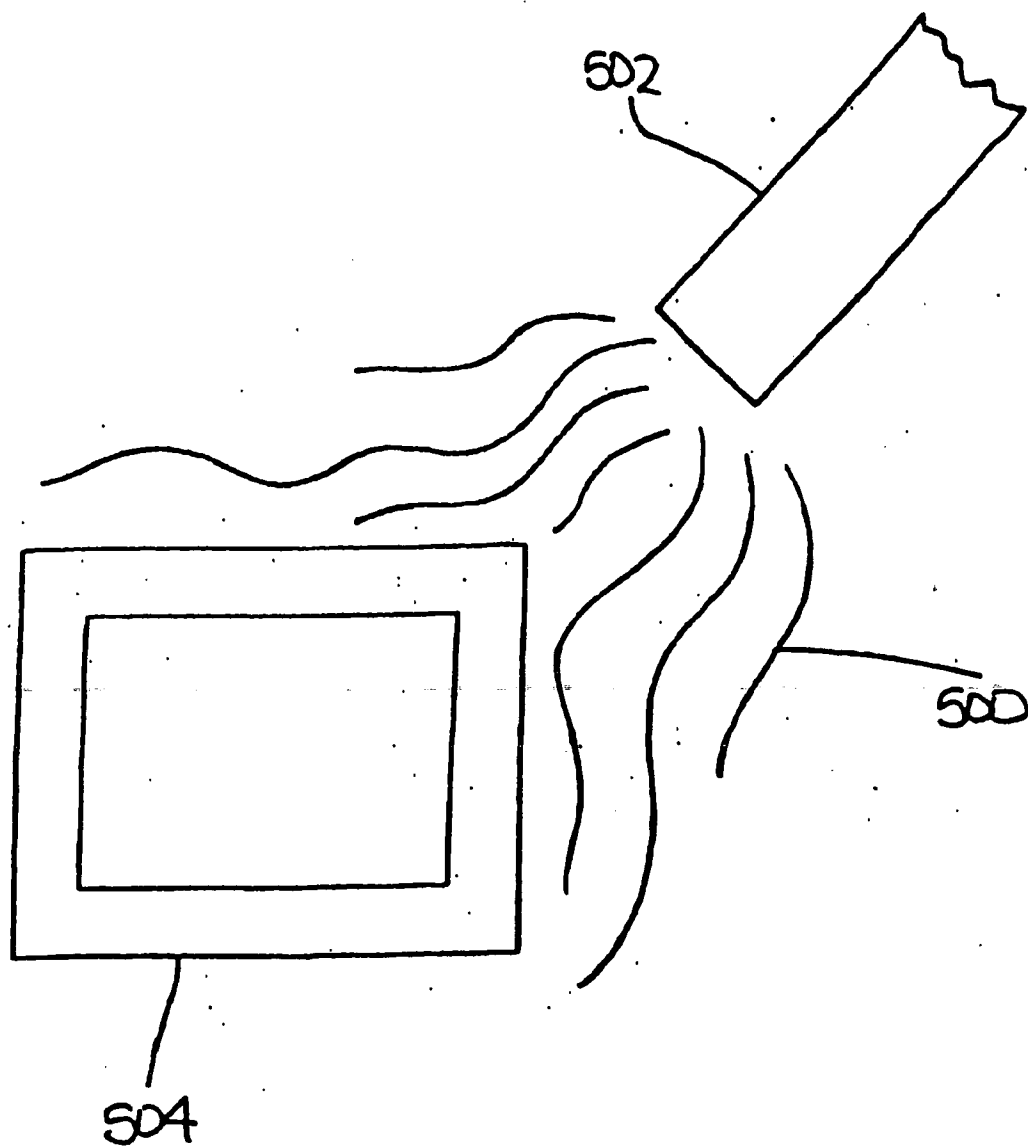


FIG. 5

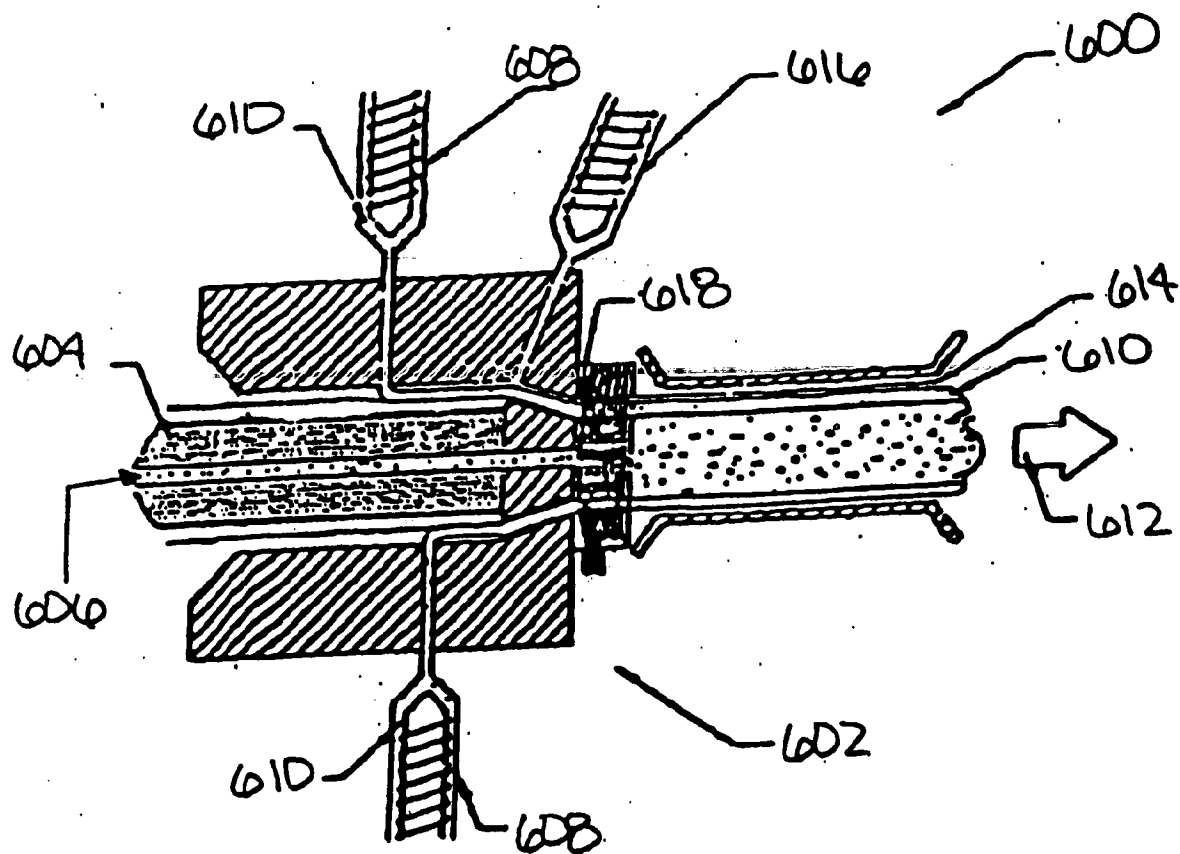


FIG. 6

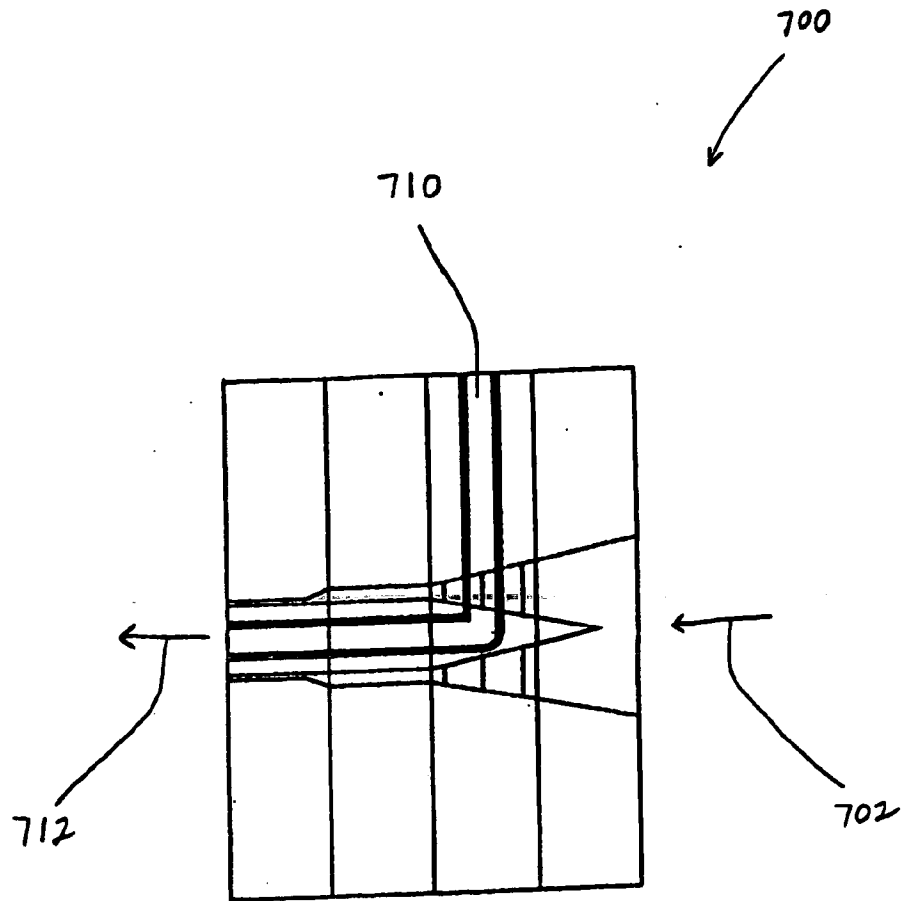


Figure 7

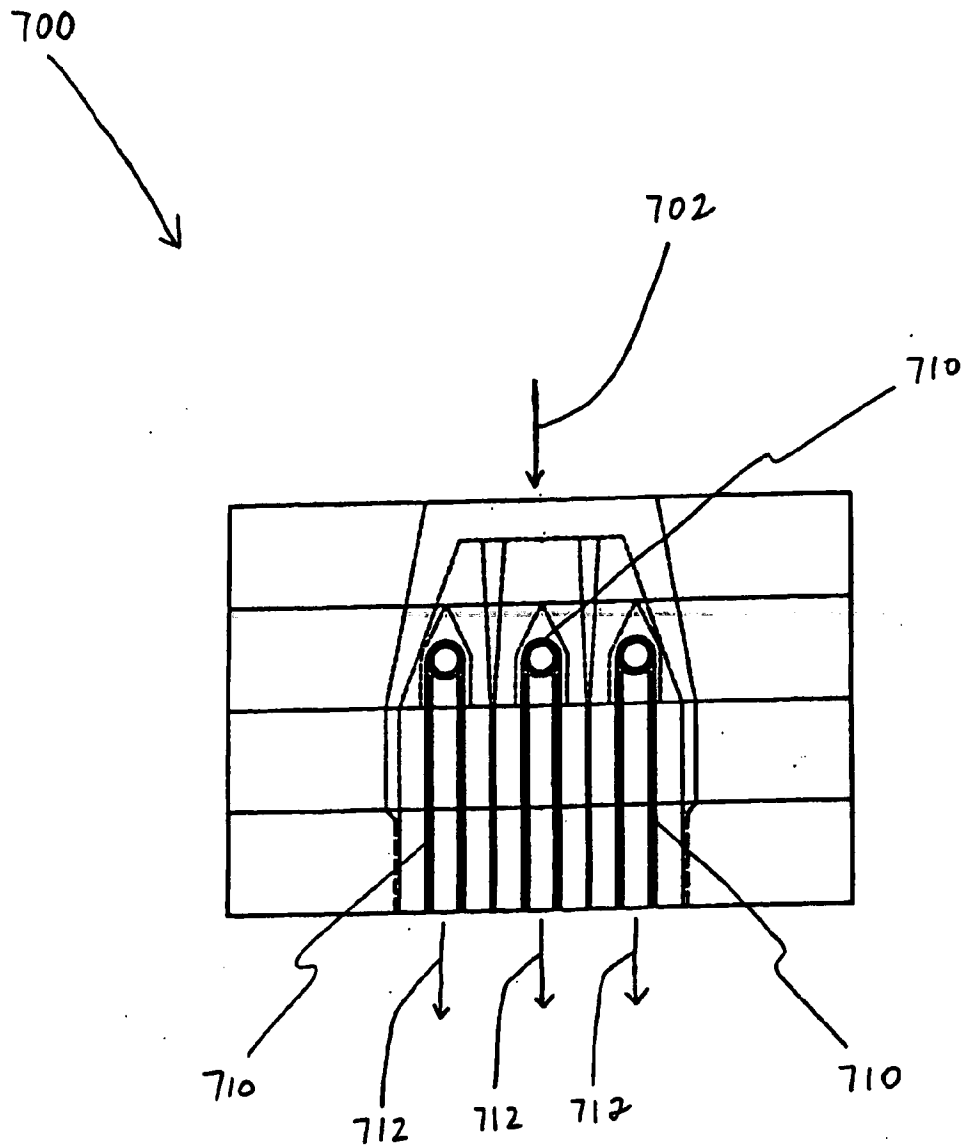


Figure 8

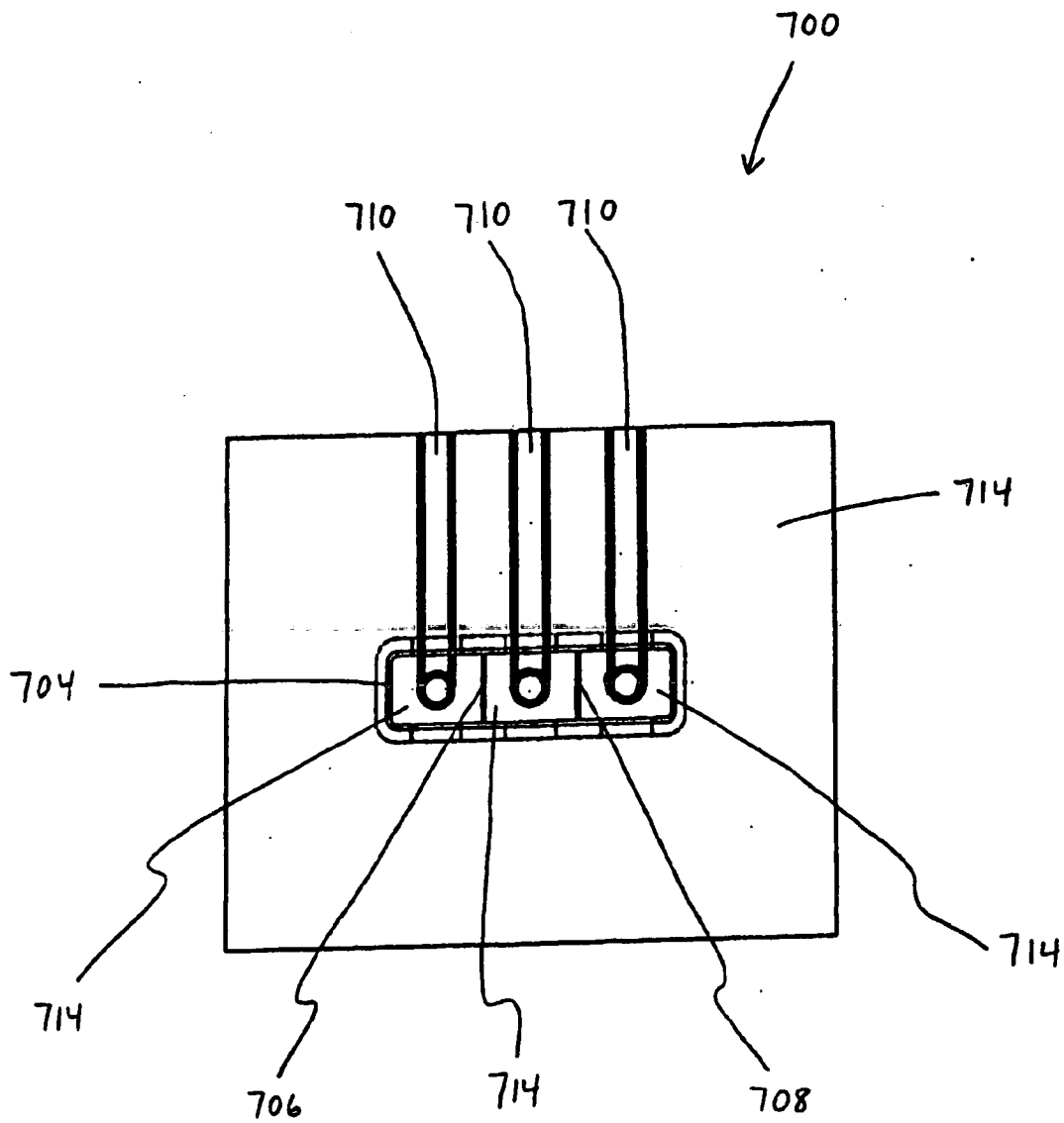


Figure 9

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